



Galatians 4:21-31
Sons or Slaves?

Summary: You can live by your own plotting and planning or by faith in the promises of God, both require effort and both produce results, but only one is pleasing to God.

One of the prayers that Madeleine and I have learned to pray over the years is, "Lord, don't let me conceive an Ishmael." Now to understand what that means, you have to know some Scripture, but it's basically a prayer that says, 'God, I don't want to do something that You don't want me to do and then have to live with the consequences. Keep me from making the wrong choice here – especially when it seems like my idea could work - keep me from conceiving an Ishmael.'

This morning, we're getting back into the book of Galatians, which, you remember, was written to people who had become Christians. They had no Jewish background, either ethnically, culturally, or religiously. But now there were being told that if they really wanted to be good Christians, they start following a long list of Jewish religious rules, beginning with circumcision for all the men.

Paul heard what was happening and told them no, that's not true. Christians do not live by rules and rituals, they live by faith. We focus on what God has done for us, not on what we do for God. And that brings us to Ishmael. You see Ishmael was the result of a time when Abraham tried to do something for God instead of waiting for God to do something for him.

Now, in order to explain all of this and help you understand what we're reading in Scripture, we'll have to talk about a lot of names and history this morning. But I'll give you the bottom line up front so you know why this is important: here, in Galatians 4, God uses the family of Abraham to show us, that you can live by your own strategy and planning, or you can live by faith in His promises - *both require effort and both produce results*, but only one is ultimately pleasing to God.

And that is incredibly relevant and practical for us today because our lives are filled with decisions to be made, along with issues and events to react to. So, how will you make those decisions, and how will you respond to new events? Will you come up with a plan to get the results and outcome you want, or will you cling to the promises of God?

And look – *that's not an easy question*. You'll probably vacillate back and forth between the two because life is real and it demands real choices which produce real consequences. And it's not always easy to know – should I sit and wait and watch or should I do something? Many of you are carrying heavy weights right now – you're trying to figure out, what should I do about this thing in my life, how should I respond, what choice should I make, and why hasn't God, or why isn't God showing up or making this easy? Is there something I'm supposed to do? Something practical?

I encourage you to ask those questions, wrestle through God's direction and your circumstances, but I warn you: don't conceive an Ishmael.

Let's dig into more of what that means now:

Galatians 4:21 Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? **22** For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. **23** But he *who was* of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, **24** which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar— **25** for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children— **26** but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. **27** For it is written:

*“Rejoice, O barren,
You who do not bear!
Break forth and shout,
You who are not in labor!
For the desolate has many more children
Than she who has a husband.”*

28 Now we, brethren, as Isaac *was*, are children of promise. **29** But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him *who was born* according to the Spirit, even so *it is* now. **30** Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? *“Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.”* **31** So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

I know this is a lot to track, but you have to stick with me here because God is trying to tell us something super important.

Thousands of years ago, God showed up in the life of Abraham with a plan to bring salvation for everyone separated from God by sin. He needed to start somewhere, so He used this man Abraham and we're never given any reason for that choice. It wasn't like Abraham was some king in the region, or a priest, or an accomplished statesman or general. God just made a choice – I'm going to use you.

In fact, there were reasons not to make the choice. One of which was his age. Abraham was 75 years old when God called him. He was married to Sarah. And they had no children.

But God showed up and made a covenant with him – a promise of what God would do. He told the man, I will give you land to live in, which today we call Israel, I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the shores, and one of your descendants will be the Savior through which I bring salvation.

Now Abraham was absolutely convinced of what God had said. He knew what he had heard. But that didn't make believing it easy. And that is the problem we have all had throughout history from Adam and Eve in the Garden, up to the present day – we know what God has said, we know what He has promised, we read it in His Word, or could have sworn we heard Him guide our lives.

The problem isn't so much with what we heard, or read, or experienced, it's with fitting that into our present circumstances. What was Satan's first question to Eve – "Has God really said?" She knew what God had said, but sitting here, looking at present circumstances, it was hard to be sure. It was hard to believe. It seemed like maybe other things were going on, other things were possible, maybe what God said doesn't mean what I thought it meant at first. Doubt creeps in. You battle it too, and so do I.

Well, doubt crept in for Abraham. He waited ten years to have this God-promised child and the child never came. But let's give the man some credit. He waited *ten years* for God to make good on what already seemed like an impossible promise.

So, at age 85, Sarah, his wife, grew impatient and suggested another idea – that Abraham also marry Hagar, Sarah's maid, and have a surrogate child through her. That sounds strange to us, but it was completely acceptable in their culture, it seemed like a good solution, a viable option, it seemed like something that could work.

I want to be really clear on this: *it seemed like a good way to make things happen kind of like God said they would*. Nothing else was happening, and this idea wasn't way off track, it was close to what God said, and they could try it.

But it wasn't God's will, it wasn't God's way. Do you know what it was? It was a way to reduce the tension, to reduce the discomfort of waiting. It gave them a sense of control because they were taking action, they were doing something. And look: something happened. It 'worked' if you want to call it that. Their thinking and planning got things moving: Hagar became pregnant.

But shortly afterwards, Sarah became jealous. Her servant was now pregnant, carrying her husband's child, something she, in all their years of marriage, had never been able to do. So a bit of animosity bubbles up between the two women. And pay attention to that – things were apparently fine between them before all of this happened. And arguably, if they had waited on God to fulfill His promise His way, things would still be fine between them. But taking matters into their own hands brought unintended consequences.

Well, Hagar eventually has the child and it's a boy – now there is someone to carry on Abraham's family line. They name him Ishmael and you can read about all of this in Genesis chapter 16. So, yeah, there's been a little bit of friction and fighting in Abraham's tent lately, but it looks like things 'worked' and maybe everything else will eventually work out too if you just give it some time.

Well, years go by, and now, when Abraham is 99 God speaks to him again and renews the promise that he will have a son, with Sarah. And then, God communicates the same thing to her directly.

Within a year it happens and they name the boy Isaac, which means laughter because it's absolutely ridiculous that a couple that age should have a child.

You have to understand that – it was always meant to be seen as a miracle. And maybe that's why God waited 25 years to fulfill the promise – so that everyone would know, it wasn't the result of a good plan or diligent effort on Abraham's part, it was a miraculous gift by the grace of God.

Friends, God often does this. He allows things to get to the point where it seems impossible, it seems like there is no way out, it seems there's nothing left to do or it's too late, and then, when there could be no other possible explanation, He shows up and does exactly what He wants to do so everyone involved knows: it was Him.

But here's the hard part of that – it means you have wait and struggle through some really, really, tough moments. You have to wonder and pray and question and cry, *what's going on? What should I do?* You see options – things you really *could* do or try, things you *could* talk yourself into, things that might work, and you have to discern (and remember that's a spiritual gift that God might give to you or to someone else in your life that loves you and will think and pray with you), but you have to discern: *should we do this or not?*

You'll need to determine: is God arranging circumstances so we can try this, or are we supposed to hold on by faith? *And that will be hard.*

Well, going back to the story of Abraham we see what happened when you have both – the son born by your own planning and efforts, the way that 'made sense' and the son who is a completely inexplicable gift by the grace of God.

In that culture, they would have a celebration when a child was weaned from the mother – it was a milestone in life. Well, when they had that party for Isaac, he was around 3 years old. Hagar's son Ishmael was now 17 and Ishmael mocked his little brother.

That didn't go over well with Sarah who had already been feeling resentment toward Hagar and her son, so she told Abraham: those two have to go. And God told Abraham, she's right.

Now God took care of Hagar and her son, in fact, to this day, Ishmael is considered to be the father of the Arab nations just as Isaac is father of the Jews. Muslims, Christians, and Jews all celebrate Abraham, but through different sons and for different reasons. But think about this: how well do the descendants of Hagar's son Ishmael and the descendants of Sarah's son Isaac get along today?

Sending Hagar and Ishmael away was hard for Abraham, because, after all, the boy was his biological son. They shared the same DNA.

And you might ask: well, why couldn't God have used Ishmael? Since he was already there, why not just use what you've got? That sounds like a good idea at first, but if you go with it, then the story for all of history is: God made a promise to Abraham *and Abraham found a way to make it work* - instead of God: made a promise to Abraham and there was no way it would ever work, until God showed up with a miracle.

Those are two different stories and they lead in two totally different directions. Two totally different outlooks on life.

And that gets to the heart of what Paul is saying to the Galatians. We are either going to live by faith and trust in God, waiting for Sarah to conceive Isaac, or we are going to try to come up with our own ideas and wind up conceiving Ishmael with Hagar.

It's one or the other. It can't be both.

You can't wait and trust while also plotting and planning, experimenting and exploring. You either believe it's up to God, or you believe it's up to you.

So Paul uses the two women and their two sons as typologies. People who want to trust that following religious rules and rituals will make God happy are like Abraham sleeping with Hagar, it "works," it produces something, but it's not quite right. You end up with a servant instead of an heir. And this is what the religion in Jerusalem had been reduced to in their day. Remember how much Jesus criticized the priestly leadership and religious zealots? They were doing religious things, but they were building their own system and then applauding themselves for keeping it. Racially they were descendants of Sarah, but they were acting like children of Hagar.

<u>My Way</u>	<u>God's Way</u>
Hagar, the slave	Sarah, the free woman and spouse
Conceives Ishmael	Conceives Isaac
Like religion in Jerusalem: all rules and rituals without faith	Like heavenly Jerusalem – received by faith

Meanwhile Jesus applauded people whose lives were a mess, people who felt hopeless and despondent because they knew they weren't good enough so they just cast themselves at the feet of God begging for mercy. Jesus commended and applauded people who said, I can't do anything about this situation, but I've come to You to see if You can, and if You don't, well, I don't have any other options. They were like Sarah conceiving Isaac – it was never going to happen except by faith that God Himself would fulfill His own promises.

Friends, this is always the way God has worked. He does the impossible. The unlikely. He makes something happen that you never saw coming, never even considered as an option.

Think of Daniel in the lion's den. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the furnace, Paul sailing through the storm. They all faced difficult times; things they thought could end in death. God didn't save them from the situation; He waited and showed up *in* the situation – when things seemed impossible.

Hear the message of hope in that. God loves the least, the last, the lost, the unlikely, the powerless. God looked down on the same situation as Abraham and saw things differently. He saw Hagar, young, fertile, capable, yeah, *she could work*. And He saw Sarah, old, unlikely, impossible. And He choose Sarah.

Some of you have made a list of reasons why God couldn't or wouldn't use you. You have your list of factors or failures or past events that mean it's not going to happen. But God doesn't see it that way. Where and how are you writing yourself off?

Your objections may be true. Sarah was old. She had not had any children up to this point. You could safely predict she never would. But God is greater. And He had spoken, He had decided, He had determined.

So when the time was right according to His own calendar, He moved. And Sarah gave birth to Isaac who had a son of his own named Jacob whose name was later changed to Israel, and he had twelve sons who formed twelve tribes that were the beginning of the nation.

And later, in that nation, God would choose another unlikely mother, a woman unable to have children, her name was Hannah, and God blessed her with a son – Samuel, who became a prophet, who anointed the kings of his nation, including King David.

And many years later, God chose another unlikely mother, a virgin girl named Mary, a descendent of Abraham and Isaac, born into the line of King David, to be our savior – Jesus, the King of the Kings and Lord of Lords.

This is how God works: through grace. Doing impossible things for us that we could never do for ourselves. Our salvation and sustainment are the result of His initiative, mercy, kindness, power and love. They are not the result of our clever plans or diligent work.

And so, if the gospel is true, it doesn't matter who you are, what you've done, or what you're doing. You can be saved, and you can bear fruit, fruit that will last. Good can come from your life, and it can come when you least expect it. In that sense, the gospel is incredibly inclusive, from the bottom up.

The greater warning is actually for those at the top – and there are more people like that in our congregation than the other. So friends, beware your strengths. Beware of thinking “well, we could always try this, or that.” Maybe you can. But are you sure that you should?

You can choose things, pursue things, and actually accomplish things that will disappoint you when you have them or devastate you if you lose them. Beware of clever planning or determined action that lessens your need to lean on, trust in, or draw strength and guidance from God.

Here's the uncomfortable truth: we live in a fallen world. Things are not as they are supposed to be. God has promised to make all things right...eventually. So, He might not work all the miracles you want Him to work. Your life might not turn out exactly the way

you hoped. You may go through a long season of difficulty and never find the outcome you wanted. This world is broken by sin, and we feel the consequences. How you respond to that truth is everything.

If you try to make things better on your own, if you come up with a plan or listen to the plan being spread by someone else, it may give you things to do, it may fill your time and thoughts, it might even seem to “work,” like Sarah’s plan with Hagar, it relieved some pressure for the moment, but it only produced more problems later on. Paul is telling the Galatians, you can go do all that religious rule stuff, and it might make you feel really spiritual for a while, but God is not in it and after the newness has worn off it’s just going to feel empty.

Or, you can trust in God. Trust in His Word, trust in His promises – for years if necessary.

Now, I wish I could tell you something different, but I can’t. You are going to feel stretched and pressed and tried in this life. There is no short cut, there is no durable, dependable escape from the pain of this life, there’s only one option: to trust. After all, what is the essence of sin in our lives? It’s choosing what seems best to us when we already know what God says.

So what do you do? Because the answer isn’t always clear and sometimes, as time goes on, we’re not sure – did God really say? Does God really know? Has God really heard?

The answer is: we work to find a balance of diligence and dependence while following God’s direction. Abraham had direction; he knew what should happen. And it involved him – there was something for him to do: pursue intimacy with his wife. And to be diligent about that, while also depending on God, because the promise could only happen if God showed up. Diligence and dependence under God’s direction.

So too with us. If you have a sense of the direction God wants you to go, go! *and* be diligent. Do what you can do, but also, be dependent – wait for Him to show up. If He doesn’t, keep waiting, keep being diligent according to His direction – *you are not wasting your time*. Your heart may grow weary, you may have seasons of struggle or doubt, but you will never really regret, nor ever really go wrong, spending your life diligently pursuing God’s direction and waiting in dependence on Him. Wait for the promise of Isaac, don’t conceive an Ishmael.

Let’s pray.